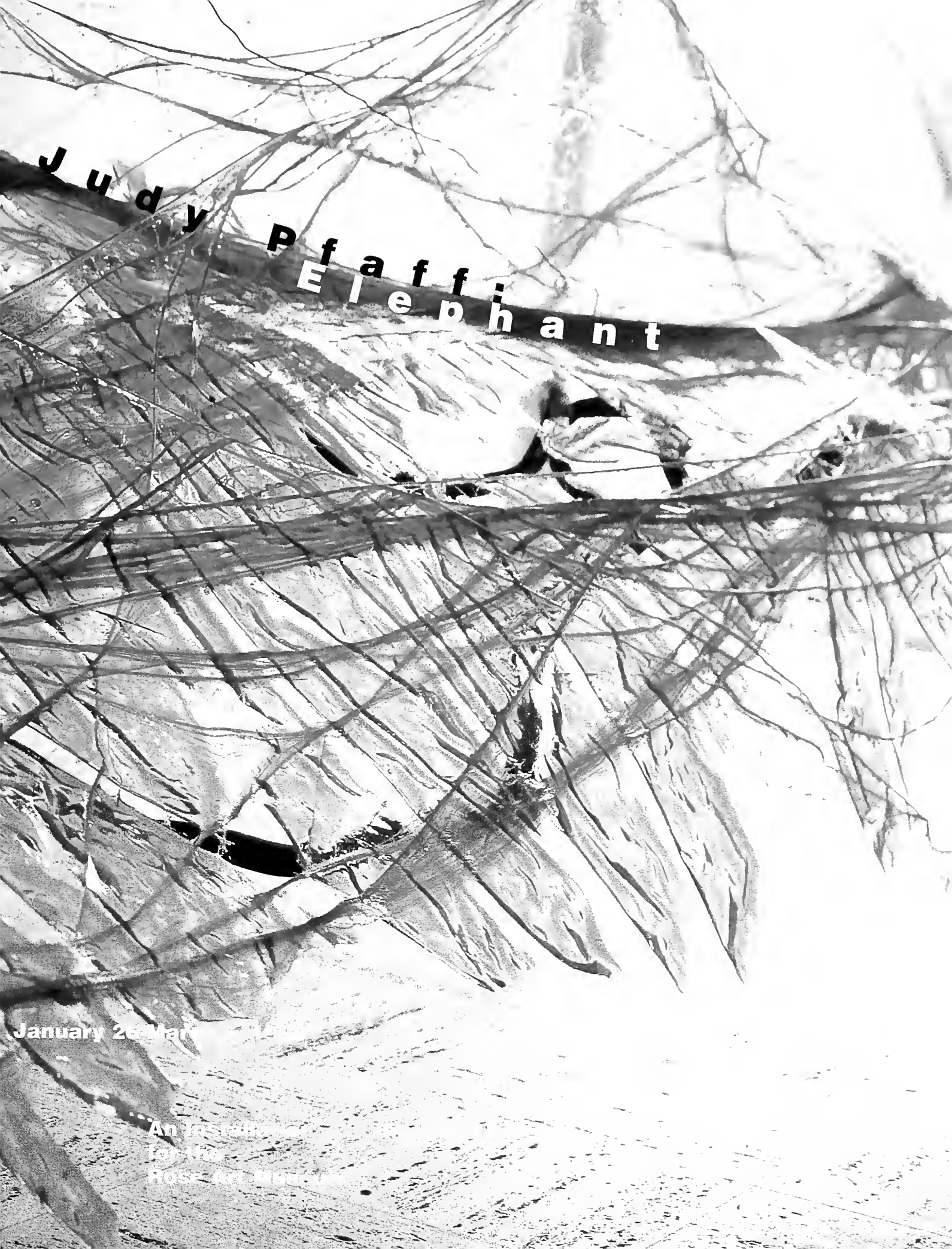
Judy Pfaff
Elephant

Acknowledgments

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CB

Notes on *Elephant*

Judy Pfaff produced *Elephant* during a two-week residency at Brandeis University in January 1995. She made two visits to campus prior to the residency, the first to assess and determine which of our spaces she would utilize for the installation, the second to discuss her past work via a slide presentation to students and other members of the University community. That discussion took place in April 1994, and all of us who were eagerly looking forward to the project hoped it would conclude with a description of what Judy planned for the Rose Art Museum. That turned out not to be the case, and the explanation was simple enough: She was totally involved with a major commission for the Pennsylvania Convention Center in Philadelphia, a 70,000-square-foot project that had been initiated in 1992 and was scheduled for completion in December 1994. Learning this, I was not surprised at not hearing from her throughout the summer and fall that preceded her residency here, though I did become a little anxious as January approached, wondering if she would arrive with sufficient energy and materials—she hadn't asked us to supply anything, only to paint the gallery walls a very cold white—to make the installation happen.

Arrive she did, right on schedule and eager to get started, with several assistants—students from the University's Department of Fine Arts had volunteered to fill out the crew—and a

truckload of materials that included copper wire, fiberglass resin, steel pipe, plastic ducts and tubes, vines, tree roots, dried lily pads, tools of all kinds for bending and cutting and welding the metal, buckets for dyeing the fiberglass and vats for coating it with resin, arcane books illustrating Tibetan medicine and natural history, a coffee maker, a small TV, a new boom box along with plenty of tapes, and about a dozen of her own mixed media drawings that would augment the installation. As she later told me—and she otherwise gave no clue—the only thing she didn't have was an idea about how she would put it all together. Responsive to the site, she talked about wanting to unite the upstairs and downstairs galleries with the light well between them and the pool below, but what she didn't say was that she had brought no single element that she felt could do that job.

She found it on the way back from the quick lunch that followed the unloading of the truck: a 40-foot gray birch tree growing precariously on the edge of a small stream that runs behind the museum and an adjacent parking lot. She wanted to dig it out, roots and all, and bring it into the building. We learned it was destined for removal anyway, because it posed a threat to the cars nearby, so I suggested she go ahead. That was on Friday, January 13, which was 13 days before the show would open. The removal of the tree looked like a dauntingly ambitious undertaking, I had no idea how she would manage it or what she had in mind if she

actually could manage it, so I wished her luck and left for the start of a three-day weekend. I had planned not to return until the following Tuesday, but curiosity got the best of me by Saturday afternoon, and I drove to the museum to see what was happening with the tree. It was where it had been, and it looked determined to stay there, the efforts of the crew with their picks and shovels notwithstanding. Judy needed a length of heavy chain. Could I call someone in the University and get one? I tried a few phone calls but without success; the University was effectively closed for the weekend. I asked Rob van Erve, Judy's chief assistant, what we could do; calmly, and with a smile that encouraged confidence, he said they'd figure a way—"When Judy wants it done, it gets done."

The tree was in the museum by Tuesday morning, horizontally suspended in the light well, its naked branches greeting me as I entered the upper gallery, its roots positioned against the gallery's back wall where paint was wildly splashed and spattered, as it was splashed and spattered over the trunk and limbs as well, looking altogether like a giant artist's brush that had been wielded with intuitively expressionistic abandon. Seeing it, and amazed by its commanding presence in the space, I didn't want to ask how it had gotten there—and there was no physical evidence that would have enabled me to guess, no scrapes or gouges or signs of mayhem—for I preferred to think it happened effortlessly, through Judy Pfaff's creative magic.

That was the start of *Elephant*, and during the 10 days that followed—each one at least a 16-hour day—my image of the tree-as-brush was constantly expanded and reinforced. The galleries became a three-dimensional canvas, here filled with translucent color—the sheets of fiberglass—there extended by seemingly weightless linear arabesques—the lengths of copper wire and steel pipe. As it evolved, however, the installation became more than a celebration of painting and drawing, more than "mere" art, for nature was constantly woven into its fabric. The vines were transformed into a fountain that descended from upper to lower galleries, glistening with water that in turn brought the dried lily pads to eerie life and caused the stiffened fiberglass and cold metal to seem organic; moss was gathered to cover the surrounding edge of the pool in which flowering reeds were planted; and the drawings, two of which Judy created on the spot after gathering plant material she had discovered on the campus grounds, further glowed with images of the exotic flora and fauna she found in her illustrated books. Art and nature were thus bound into a sprawling, enchanted environment whose every detail spoke of creative transformation and renewal.

Judy decided to title her installation shortly before bringing it to completion. She said the installation reminded her of the parable of the blind men and the elephant in which each man, remaining stationary, touched only one part of the beast and accordingly failed to comprehend it as a whole. So it was with the Rose installation, which spread over two stories of the museum, floor to ceiling, and with reflections off glass and water seemed to reach beyond the confines of the building itself. The whole could not be grasped from any one place, it had to be moved through, explored part by part, its character accumulating in the process. As one who had the opportunity to experience *Elephant* nearly every day of its month-and-a-half life span, I can attest to the cumulative effect of its rich complexity and multiple layers of meaning—it was a memorably rewarding experience.

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